



The Fate of Lone Wolf

Our adventure for the day was not yet over. True, we had flown over the top of Sandia Crest and landed safely. The envelope for Sundancer was draped over the road and we were backing up traffic, but the people seemed to be good natured about the delay. We had landed part way up the switchback road that led to the top of the mountain. People gathered around, wanting to be helpful, so we let them line up down the length of the envelope and carefully pick it up and walk it around until we could lay it down the shoulder of the road instead of right across the middle. Everyone seemed to be talking at once.

"The way you were coming in, I thought you were in trouble," the lady from the pickup said. "You hit the tree just as I was coming around the corner. I thought it would dump you out of the basket."

"Man, it was beautiful the way you swooped down in the canyon and then flew back out," a young man from the van interjected. "Just like a big bird. Do you do that often?"

"Hey, how big is that thing anyway?" someone else asked. "How did you get it clear up here?"

While we were standing there talking, I kept looking for some sign of a chase vehicle. Several people drove by, waving to us, but there was no sign of the crews we had sent around the mountain ahead of us. We had no way of knowing if they had seen us go down or even if they knew how to get to us if they had seen us. The lady with the pickup offered to take us

back down the mountain. We had started dismantling the gear when the chase vehicle for the U. S. Navy balloon pulled around the curve.

"We saw you come over the top," the driver said. "We were waiting in the parking lot at the cafe. It looked like you were having problems getting a wind headed our way, so we started up the road. We lost you as you popped in and out of the canyons. I just took a guess that you'd try to land on the road and headed up this way."

"Yeah, we thought you might have had to land on the other side of the ridge," another crew member ventured. "If you had, we would've been the rest of the day diggin' you out."

"Come on, you guys," George said. "Have I ever failed to land someplace where we could get the balloon out fairly easy? I don't like to work any more than you do."

"I don't know if I would've tried landing here or not," the driver said, as he looked at the narrowness of the space we had set the balloon in. "How'd you keep from hitting the cliff?"

"See that tree over there? If we hadn't hit it and slowed down, I think we would have slid clear across the road."

"Boy! That sure would have done a number on the balloon."

I asked if anyone had seen our chase crew but no one had. We inquired about Lone Wolf and they said the last time they spotted her she was headed north, almost parallel to the highway. We didn't have a storage bag, so we packed the envelope carefully into the gondola and headed back down the mountain. The entire eastern side of the mountain was in a shadow now. It would be dark in another hour and a half. Fortunately, our pickup and chase crew were waiting in the parking lot of the cafe.

"We hurried as fast as we could and saw you just as you were coming over the top," Phil said. "Bob drove like a maniac."

"Yeah, but Linda was the one who got stopped by the cops," Bob replied.

She had, and had talked her way out of a ticket by pointing to the balloons and insisting she had to catch up to them before they crashed. No one had the slightest idea where Lone Wolf had landed so, after we had repacked the envelope into the storage bag and loaded Sundancer into our pickup, we

cracked out the refreshments and settled down to wait. There were at least two other crews and vehicles assigned to keep track of Lone Wolf. If they needed help, someone would be sent back to the cafe.

We had been waiting for about a half hour when one of the chase vehicles assigned to Lone Wolf came down the road from the north. There was no balloon in the back.

"Gary is down somewhere between here and Golden," the driver said. "He was headed north and we lost sight of him behind some low hills. He may have had to do a rip-out landing."

In a rip-out landing the balloon is leveled out with the gondola about three feet above the ground. Then the deflation panel is ripped open as wide as possible so the air will be forced out rapidly when the balloon hits the ground. Hopefully, this will prevent the balloon from being dragged very far. If everyone is braced right, you seldom get more than a few bruises, but Lone Wolf had one of the old-style open side aluminum gondolas that greatly increased the danger to the passengers.

"What do you want us to do?" Bob asked.

"I think we need to spread the crews out along the road. If no one is hurt, I expect Gary will have Jim walk out to the road. Someone should spot him pretty quickly if we each cover a short stretch of highway. If it gets to be dark, or if someone is hurt, they will build a fire and we should be able to see it from the hill tops."

The crews climbed back into the trucks and cars. The light was fading fast. Vehicles dropped off at about two mile intervals to patrol a short section of road. Twilight was fading into darkness when someone finally spotted Jim hiking to the highway. He reported that Lone Wolf had landed in a clearing about a half mile off the road.

"We came over the crest too far to the north," Jim said. "By the time we could get down to the valley, the wind had turned north. Gary tried to find some wind current crossing a road, but from up high we couldn't see anything that even looked like a road for miles in the direction we were heading."

"How was your fuel?" George asked.

"Oh, I think that was OK. The big thing was, we couldn't see any chance of our flight path taking us across a road before

dark. We came across this large clearing and it was just too good to pass up."

"How was the landing?"

"Pretty hairy," Jim grinned. "The wind was about twelve to fifteen knots. The only choice was a rip-out. Gary did a beautiful job of layin' her right down the center of the clearing. We didn't tear the envelope or nothin'."

As we were talking, the rest of the crews were called in. Four people headed back toward the clearing with the storage bag for the envelope and the rest of us looked over the situation. The highway was fenced down both sides. We either had to find a gate where we could bring in a four-wheel drive vehicle, or cut the fence, or pack the balloon out by hand. Cutting the fence would only be done as a last resort. Everyone in ballooning works hard at keeping landowners happy. If the fence had to be cut, we would have to be out the next day repairing it.

We decided on a two-pronged approach. Most of us would set out on foot to the clearing and get the balloon ready to pack out by foot. Two of the pickups with hand spotlights would search the fence line until they found a gate and then try to bring in a four-wheel drive to get the gondola out. I glanced up at the sky. At least we'd have a full moon later on.

It was fairly easy to find Lone Wolf just by listening to the noise from where the people were gathered around the gondola. The branches of the scrub trees pulled at our jackets as we half slid down the side of a gully and then climbed out the other side. If we had to pack the balloon out, it was going to be a long job. By the time we arrived, the envelope was packed. Someone had carried in a six-pack of beer and a bottle of champagne had ridden across the crest in the gondola. Gary was just preparing to open the champagne.

"Hey, you're just in time," he called as we came out of the trees. The champagne cork popped and arched out of sight; most of the contents of the bottle followed, as he tried to keep his thumb clamped over the opening. All he succeeded in doing was spraying those nearby. "Crap, it must have gotten more shook up on the landing than I thought."

He held the bottle up to his lips, edged his thumb off the opening, and champagne sprayed into his mouth. When the pressure had died down, he passed the bottle to someone else.

"We've got plenty more back at the truck," Jim said. "I packed three more bottles in the ice chest."

"It was beautiful, just beautiful," Gary said to George and me. "I was about 500 feet above you guys when you came across the top. You could see Sundancer against the pine trees like some picture in a magazine."

"How was your crossing?" I asked.

"We were high enough we didn't even get caught in the downdraft that nailed you guys," he answered. "I went right over the ski area and then down the north ridge. I thought we were going to be able to make the road, but I guess Jim told you what happened."

The beer vanished just as fast as the champagne had and then it was time to prepare for the hard work. Gary and I started to unstrap the propane tanks.

"Wait a minute, Cal," Gary said, straightening up. "I think I can hear a truck comin' in."

Everyone stopped talking and we could hear the labored sound of a motor coming closer. Soon headlights were visible through the trees and Linda's four-wheel drive truck pulled into the clearing. It took two trips to get everything out and by the time we walked back out to the moon-lit highway, a picnic was in full swing. All the vehicles were strung out in two lines along both shoulders of the road. Several people had brought snacks and these were laid out on the tailgate of one pickup about in the middle of the pack. Phil was sitting on an ice chest, passing out goodies.

"Here, Dad, have a sandwich," and he handed me a fistful of salami, pickles, and mustard jammed between two slices of rye.

Music from a radio drifted across the highway. Occasionally a car would pass on the highway and the people would wave to us. Some people would drive past with their faces rigidly held forward like they didn't want to see us. It must have seemed strange to them, to come around a corner and see people picnicking, in the middle of the night, along the side of the road, in the middle of nowhere. Of course they hadn't just flown "The Crest" and retrieved a balloon out of the middle of the desert. Poor souls. They didn't know what fun was.